



Her Story, Her Stage: Reimagining the Devadasi Legacy

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Abstract

Miss Nagarathnamma (1878-1952) of Bangalore was among the earliest female artists of India with a devadasi background, who was recorded on the very first recording session conducted by The Gramophone Company Ltd., in 1904-05, in Madras. In addition to her celebrated status as a 'Gramophone Artist' in the formative period of the Indian sound recording industry, Nagarathnamma's significance further lies profoundly in her intrepid stance against the 'hypocritical self-righteous stand of the purists and self-appointed custodians of high culture'. Her translation of Radhika Santawanamu (*The Appeasement of Radhika*), an eighteenth-century Telugu literary work authored by the courtesan Muddupalani, into Kannada was perhaps a challenge against the 'purists' and the moral purification drive of colonial modernity that desired to obliterate the voices of women, particularly those from the devadasi tradition. By countering their eradication from historical and artistic narratives, Nagarathnamma's voice transcended the musical sphere to become a power of resistance against the cultural marginalisation of courtesans. In colonial India, where female sexuality was never to be explored or talked about beyond the conjugal relationship, the translation and republication of *Radhika Santawanamu*, banned later on, immediately triggered the wrath of the contemporary patriarchal gaze of the social reformers. The fact that the government withdrew the ban on the work after the independence of India, leading to its rightful restoration and publication in 1952, indicates the layered nature of the colonial administration, especially regarding the question of women within the broader socio-cultural fabric of India.

Keywords: Devadasi, Gramophone, Music, Marginalisation, Patriarchy.

Introduction

In pre-colonial India, *devadasis* were primarily revered as the custodians of cultural heritage and performing arts in India. The arrival of British rule brought the socio-cultural practices of the country under the scrutiny of Victorian morality, which equated the *devadasis* with 'promiscuous women' and tried to push them to the periphery of society. Once regarded as respectable and integral to tradition, certain forms of ancient art lost their probity and were labelled as 'adulterous' under the new colonial regime. The term *devadasi*, denoting a handmaiden of God, a woman considered married to the deity and once recognised as a respectable member of society, began to lose social reverence by the late nineteenth century. The practice of offering young women to temples in God's name dates back to ancient civilisations, and this practice, known as *devadasi*, was well established in India, particularly in South India. The culture of the *devadasis* consisted of a rigid hierarchy based on their duties at the shrine. Starting with cleaning the holy place,

the higher ranks included preparing *shringar* (to adorn) for the deity, and at the highest level, *devadasis* had to sing and dance before the deity. Some women performed these arts outside the territory of the temple as well. They were sometimes engaged in serving kings, priests, or wealthy patrons. During festivals or social celebrations, it was not uncommon for the *devadasis* to display their art and amuse people with the performance of music and dance. As a community, chastity was never a parameter in their living. Thus, *devadasis* enjoyed varying social statuses depending on the nature of their services. They maintained distinct occupational roles and were never identified with women involved exclusively in prostitution in pre-colonial India. (Sriram, 2007, pp. xi-xiii)

The *devadasi* culture though started as a sacrosanct profession, with time, especially with the arrival of the British and the resultant growing domination of the colonial rule along with the Victorian ethos, this professional guild was crystallised into a caste of 'subaltern'. The demarcation lines, depending on occupational assignments among the *devadasis*, started to fade away and ultimately resulted in making a homogeneous identity in the gaze of the colonial administration as 'pious prostitute'. From the aspect of Victorian idealism, the Indian concept of 'eroticism' was considered rather disgraceful and as a result, the *devadasi* repertoire, which was mainly erotic in nature, by losing its earlier glory, was redefined as 'obscene verses' that illustrated licentious episodes of the 'history of Hindu Gods'. (Dubois, 1943, p. 585) By the turn of the twentieth century, with the growing influence of occidental ethos, the Western-educated Indians also appeared intensely antagonistic towards the custom of the *devadasi*. Along with the orthodox Brahmins, the neo-literate Indian men acted as catalysts in marginalising *devadasis* and, thus, their artistic skills.

However, the women who were branded as 'immoral' and their art as 'sinful' were trained rigorously in the two forms of performing arts, i.e. music and dance. With the gradual decline of the *devadasi* tradition, many of them started migrating from the different princely states of South India and finally settled in Madras. Madras, with the presence of the wealthy merchant communities of Mudaliar, Komati and Beri Chetty, who were extending patronage towards the tradition of performing arts, especially music and *Harikatha* performances, thus emerged as the cultural epicentre of southern India. (Sriram, 2007, p. 21) Later, Madras became one of the alluring recording destinations for various recording companies in India. In 1905, The Gramophone Company Ltd. reached Madras.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, when the technology of sound recording and reproduction was striving to expand its market in India, recording enterprises came into contact with *devadasis* and their repertoire of classical music, widely known as 'Carnatic Music'. The advent of sound recording technology in colonial India was responsible for a significant transformation in the cultural landscape of the country. Traditionally regarded as accomplished performers in music and dance, these women were admired for their artistic skills, but now they were often marginalised due to their association with temple rituals or elite courtly entertainment. The introduction of the sound recording technology offered these marginalised women a new avenue for legitimising their cultural capital, leading to public acclaim. As they needed talented voices, the recording companies unhesitatingly approached and recorded the songs of these skilled women artists, who otherwise were abandoned by society and were disgracefully known by then as *devadasis*.

Transcending the caste and class boundaries, recording technology facilitated the voices of these marginalised women to reach audiences far beyond the confines of shrines, salons, or royal courts. The recorded discs preserved their art and identity as authoritative voices in Hindustani Classical and Carnatic music, often in defiance of the growing moral puritanism that sought to stigmatise them and put them at the periphery of society. Challenging the social branding, women from the *devadasi* tradition confidently came forward. They earned prestige with their mettle and artistic calibre, partially freed themselves from a dependence on elite patronage and became fairly popular during the initial period of sound recording in India. Bangalore Nagarathnamma was one of those marginalised women who stepped forward, embraced sound recording technology and became one of the early pioneers of Carnatic music in India. With her uncompromising attitude, she not only preserved her art but also questioned the eradication of the *devadasi* system from cultural and historical discourse, thereby reclaiming their significance within the socio-artistic realm of India.

Making of the 'Melody Queen'

Bangalore Nagarathnamma was one of the earliest artists from the *devadasi* background, along with Salem Godavari and Dhanakoti Ammal of Kanchipuram, who were recorded on the very first recording session conducted by The Gramophone Company Ltd. in southern India. Nagarathnamma was born on 3 November 1878 to Putta Lakshmi Ammal, an unwed woman who was a *devadasi* attached to the Sri Kanteswaram Temple of Nanjangud (present Mysuru district). Her biological father, *Vakil* M Subba Rao, deserted both the child and the mother, Putta Lakshmi, when the newborn was merely a year old. (Muddupalani, 2011: xvi) Abandoned by Subba Rao, when the destitute mother and the child were wandering on the streets, they found refuge under Giribhatta Thimmayya Shastri, a celebrated Sanskrit scholar and musician in the royal court of the Maharaja of Mysore. Under the tutelage of Shastri, young Nagarathnamma cultivated her initial interests in Sanskrit and music. Bidaram Krishnappa, one of the senior disciples of Giribhatta Thimmayya Shastri, was entrusted with the task of training Nagarathnamma in music. Nagarathnamma was dedicated to the life of a *devadasi* at the age of five. When she was about nine years old, Giribhatta Thimmayya Shastri, for reasons unknown, turned intensely averse towards the young girl. He ended his association with the mother and the daughter and even ousted them from his house. (Sriram, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Deeply insulted by Shastri's imprecation, Putta Lakshmi made it her life's mission to make her daughter a great musician and vowed never to return to Mysore until the Maharaja himself invited her daughter to the royal court. Sources suggest that Nagarathnamma's exceptional talent provoked envy among contemporaries, leading some to influence Giribhatta Thimmayya Shastri adversely. Perceiving her virtue as a threat, he allegedly grew antagonistic toward the young Nagarathnamma. However, Putta Lakshmi, a woman who was not easily to be scorned, left Mysore and moved to Bangalore in search of fortune. After reaching Bangalore, Putta Lakshmi and her young daughter took shelter under Venkitaswamy Appa, her brother and a violinist of some repute. In Bangalore, Nagarathnamma was initiated into the second phase of her musical training when she learnt to play the violin from Venkitaswamy Appa. After attaining a certain standard of knowledge about the instrument, she got the chance of apprenticeship under Munuswam Appa of Hyderabad, a reputed violinist of the time and a direct student of Walajapet

Krishnaswamy Bhagavatar of the Thyagaraja lineage.¹ Munuswam Appa trained Nagarathnamma in Carnatic music. Besides her music training, Bangalore Kittanna taught her dance, while Madras Tiruvenkatachar taught her the art of *abhinaya* (art of expression). (Sriram, 2007, p. 7) In addition to rigorous training in music and dance, she received teaching in languages such as Kannada, Telugu, and, to a degree, English.

By the time she turned fifteen, Nagarathnamma was ready for public performances. She began to perform in different illustrious assemblies of intellectuals and musicians. It did not take long for the news of a newfound lilting voice to reach the city of Mysore. Soon after, she got the opportunity to perform at the residence of the legendary 'Veena' Seshanna, who was renowned for his expertise in playing instruments like *Veena*, Violin, Piano, *Swarabath* and *Jalatarangam* and was the senior-most musician in the royal court of Mysore. (Sriram, 2007, p. 7) Her outstanding performance at Seshanna's residence marked a pivotal moment in her artistic career. The remarkable display of her musical virtuosity earned her recognition and facilitated her entry into the royal court of Mysore. Around 1893, Chamarajendra Wadiyar X (1863-1894), the then Maharaja of Mysore and a well-known connoisseur of music and the arts, extended an invitation to Nagarathnamma to perform at the royal palace. Her acceptance of this invitation led to a celebrated performance at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore, affirming not only her artistic merit but also marking a significant turning point, as it enabled her to fulfil her mother's long-standing vow and symbolically redress the social indignities and moral aspersions that had been directed at both of them. Her performance in the royal court was not merely an artistic achievement but was an act of cultural and personal reclamation, countering the prevailing hierarchies of gender, caste, and moral respectability within the socio-cultural ambit of late nineteenth-century India.

Her mother, Putta Lakshmi, though was not alive then to witness the applause her daughter received from the connoisseurs of music at the royal court of Mysore, including from *Pundit* Giribhatta Thimmayya Shastri who was also present among the audiences, the girl might have felt contented by proving herself worthy of all the sacrifices her mother had done in life only for her.² However, her performance at the royal court of Mysore added further glory to her career. She soon started receiving concert invitations from almost every corner of South India. Bangalore Nagarathnamma was credited with the rarest distinction of touring one hundred forty-six towns and cities in South India and performing at more than twelve hundred concert shows in her lifetime. (Sampath, 2021, pp. 52-58) Her fame grew as she received patronage from the royal houses of Mysore and Travancore, as well as the aristocracies of Bobbili and Vizianagaram. In Mysore, Nagarathnamma, under the patronage of Chamarajendra Wadiyar X, was adorned with the status of 'Asthana Vidushi' (an honorary title bestowed upon a court musician or dancer) of the royal court. By the time she had already garnered considerable recognition as an artist. However, Nagarathnamma's decision to resume her musical lessons under Bidaram Krishnappa, a well-known musician and composer of Carnatic music in the courts of Chamarajendra Wadiyar X and Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV (1884-1940) of the Mysore Kingdom, shows her unwavering pursuit of artistic excellence. Artistic success was not a point of arrival for Nagarathnamma but a continuously unfolding path, fuelled by the need to be recognised by the elite musical circles as much as to have a more profound claim to authority in an otherwise male-dominated artistic canon.

From Soiree to the Studio

Maharaj Chamarajendra Wadiyar X died in 1894, leaving behind his ten-year-old son, Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV, as his successor. By this time, the remonstrations against the practice of *devadasi* became quite intense and by 1896, royal families were coming under the attack of the British government for patronising 'Tafe' (as the dance of the *devadasis* was known) and spending a considerable amount of money on such 'indecent' entertainment. The practice of *devadasi* was also condemned as immoral and exploitative. It was further argued by the social reformers to be a form of institutionalised female oppression in the shadow of religious duty. It thus became difficult for Nagarathnamma to live a 'respectful' life in Mysore, and once again, she migrated to Bangalore, preferring to earn a living through her knowledge of music. Her undeniable talent drew the attention of music aficionados of the city, one among them being the judge of the Mysore Law Court, Justice T Narahari Rao. (Sriram, 2007, p. 12)

Justice Narahari Rao was a blessing to Nagarathnamma's life, especially her musical career. It was during the period of her association with Narahari Rao that Nagarathnamma's stature as a concert artist grew higher and eventually brought her to the 'Mecca of Carnatic music', i.e. Madras, where her subsequent elevation to an 'honourable woman' in the society due to an unsullied new identity of 'recording artist', became materialised, at least to some extent. By 1903, Nagarathnamma started to dwell permanently in Madras at No. 7, Srinivasa Iyer Street, George Town. (Sriram, 2007, p. 29) After relocating to Madras, Nagarathnamma continued both with her music and dance performances. However, her unconditional love for music gradually came to define her public persona. Emphasising music over dance might also have been a deliberate decision by Nagarathnamma. In the changing socio-cultural scenario of early twentieth-century India, music as a domain, unlike dance, still had better respect to offer to its practitioners, and to provide broader avenues for cultural recognition, particularly among the emerging urban elite audiences. To enhance her musical proficiency, Nagarathnamma trained herself under the musical *gurus*, Dharmapuri Subbarayar, Ramanathapuram 'Poochi' Srinivasa Iyengar and Tirukodikkaval Krishna Iyer, who taught her different aspects of music. (Sriram, 2007, pp. 25-26) However, in Madras, The Gramophone Company Ltd. decided to record Nagarathnamma during their maiden South India expedition in 1904-05.

Within a couple of years of its arrival, India emerged as one of the major free markets for recorded music. Several recording companies, especially those of international origin, became highly enthusiastic about plunging into the business of sound recording and reproduction in this country. Twelve major recording companies were commercially active in India between 1899 and 1914. These companies introduced different record labels, where at least twenty-six became popular, and those were in circulation in the Indian market during this period. (Das Gupta, 2005, p. 12) However, in the early twentieth century, when the recording concerns from the West arrived in India, intending to expand their budding business in the Indian sub-continent, they did not have any knowledge regarding India's vast and diverse musical repertoire. They found Indian music rather crass compared to Western classical music, but what they were fully aware of and were correct in their assumption was the tremendous commercial prospect in the sub-continent. To serve the Indian consumers with the finest collection of recorded music, recording enterprises recognised the necessity of exploring and understanding the musical heritage of the

country. To diversify the repertoire of recorded music, the foreign recording companies imported the idea of 'recording expedition' to India. (Parthasarathi, 2006, p. 166)

A number of record-making enterprises, though, participated and contributed in different amounts to develop a technology-based audio-culture in the Indian subcontinent; The Gramophone Company Ltd. and its contribution turned out to be most fundamental. The Gramophone Company Ltd. was the first to introduce the practice of the 'recording expedition' in India. The company continuously adapted and employed innovative marketing strategies, effective market management, and experimental content to shape and expand its commercial success worldwide. A keen awareness of a specific region's social, political, and cultural dynamics allowed The Gramophone Company Ltd. to design its commercial strategies precisely. The company promoted demand-driven audio production and eventually secured a monopoly in the Indian market. After the first 'recording expedition' conducted in 1901-02 in India, and the unexpectedly encouraging response that the company received, The Gramophone Company Ltd. realised the need for more recording tours to explore further, especially the territories of India still untouched, the southern part of the country being one among them



Fig.1. Record of Nagarathanamma, first issued in 1908

Image Courtesy: Dipannita Dutta

Image Source: Discs & Machines, Sunny's Gramophone Museum & Records Archive, Kerala, India.

The objective of the second recording tour, conducted by The Gramophone Company Ltd. in 1904-05, was to focus on those artists, who were locally popular and those who were renowned classical and theatrical vocalists and instrumentalists of the time, including musicians who were retained in the court or 'darbar' to render service to the Maharajas, Princes and nobilities of India. Featuring among them was 'Miss Nagaratnam of Bangalore'. She was thus recorded in Madras, preceded by Salem Godavari and Dhanakoti Ammal of Kanchipuram. William Sinkler Darby, assisted by Max Hempe, was the chief recording expert of the session. Nagarathnamma recorded twenty-four songs on 7-inch and 10-inch record discs in this session. (Kinner, 1994, pp. 21-25) Her songs were also issued on a 12-inch sized 'Gramophone Concert Record' label. After the introduction of the 'His Master's Voice' (HMV) record label in January 1916, Nagarathnamma's songs were reissued under the HMV record label as well.



Fig.2. Sanskrit Sloka recorded by Nagarathanamma issued in violet-coloured gramophone 'Celebrity Record' label.

Image Courtesy: Dipannita Dutta

Image Source: Discs & Machines, Sunny's Gramophone Museum & Records Archive, Kerala, India.

Thumri,³ the semi-classical form of music, popularised by the *tawaifs* or *baijis*, became the most saleable recording content of the early gramophone era, especially in northern India. In the south, genres like *Padams*⁴ and *Javalis*⁵ became popular as gramophone recordings in their initial period. Eventually, *Thyagaraja Kirtis*⁶ and *Harikatha*⁷ were also featured on the recording discs. However, detailed information regarding Nagarathnamma's recording career is very scanty. The exact date of her first-ever voice recording or the remuneration she received on her first recording session is unavailable. One probable reason behind this paucity of information regarding her professional association with the industry of sound recording might be the fact that nevertheless Nagarathnamma was an artist per excellence and achieved fame as a recording artist over the years, as most of her recorded songs topped the sales chart and later were reissued with the violet-coloured gramophone 'Celebrity Record' label, she did not record prolifically. She perhaps could not reach the rank of a 'Gramophone Star' as her contemporary vocalists, Gauhar Jaan, Janki Bai, or her friend Coimbatore Thayi could, during her lifetime.

What acted as a hindrance on her way to becoming a 'Gramophone Star' is somewhat indistinct. Initially, though Nagarathnamma was diffident about accepting the invitation to record her voice, the prevailing notion of losing the tonal quality due to lending her voice to the gramophone's 'horn' for recording might have influenced her.⁸ However, her survival instinct eventually convinced her to grasp the novel opportunity as the offers came. She perhaps could realise that developing an occupational term with The Gramophone Company Ltd. would give her some economic independence. Royalties and remuneration from the company would not only provide her with new financial avenues but would also add reverence to her music. Another aspect that might have affected her profoundly was the increasing censorship campaign, an offshoot of the anti-naught movement, a social purity movement backed by the British and many conservative, elite Indians, continuously scrutinising the *devadasis*' cultural repertoire. The recordings of Nagarathnamma bear testimony to this fact. Her initial recording foray included the erotic and sensuous genres of *Padams* and *Javalis* that *devadasis* usually sang. However, she slowly began to eschew them and decided to stick to devotional pieces, almost with the *Harikatha* style of rendition. (Sampath, 2021, pp. 52-58)

Sound recording in colonial India came as a technological boon to the 'public women', especially those belonging to the peripheral communities of *devadasi* and *tawaif*, whose voice otherwise would have been lost forever. They found in the gramophone a powerful tool for visibility and validation. The opportunity to be recorded gave them a sense of innovation and distinction, placing them within India's transforming cultural modernism. However, Nagarathnamma made around two hundred records and remained an active recording artist during the 'expedition era' of sound recording, especially for The Gramophone Company Ltd. in India. Nagarathnamma could not become comfortable with the sound recording process as it involved travails into it, like singing loudly on the recording horn so that the voice could create deep and sharp grooves on the diaphragm or get used to the 'three-minute rule'.⁹ It was only because of the qualitative value that the records she made were reissued time and again. It is interesting to note in this context that the lyrics of several of her recorded pieces were even published in gramophone song-books. These publications were, in fact, quite popular as they helped in learning music from gramophone records for those who were interested. (Sriram, 2007, p. 34)

Fight for Freedom

Nagarathnamma's recording career was perhaps associated solely with The Gramophone Company Ltd. Information, whether she had recorded for any other recording companies, of foreign or indigenous origins, is so far unknown. It is interesting to note that The Gramophone Company Ltd., with its large-scale infrastructure and mounting market, was often the foremost viable platform for pioneering artists in India. Other recording companies of foreign or Indian origin either flourished later or did not have enough reach and resources to convince artists of a high stature in the premature days of the sound recording industry in India. However, beyond her musical achievements, Nagarathnamma was further remarkable in her courageous opposition to the hypocritical self-righteousness of the purists and self-appointed guardians of high culture. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Nagarathnamma became quite a celebrated name among the circle of litterateurs and cognoscenti, where honours and recognitions became commonplace to her. Her identity as a 'Gramophone Artist' played a crucial role in reforming her popularity among the masses. The recorded discs came with an unprecedented provision of eradicating the element of 'visibility'. The technology disembodied music from its corporal source and unbound the music and the musician. This innovation 'refined' the music of these morally 'suspected' women and made it 'safe' for public consumption. The advent and gradual popularity of recorded music, in fact, came as an opportunity for them, as far as social acceptance was concerned. For Nagarathnamma, the association between melody and the machine gave her an alternative identity of a recording artist that substantially redefined her social image.

However, Nagarathnamma was a woman of considerable talent. Since childhood, she had been well acquainted with art and literature. Besides publishing poetry anthologies and religious texts, she also started delivering *Upanyasam*, spiritual and moral discourse, in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, and her mother tongue, Kannada. (Muddupalani, 2011, pp. xvii-xviii) During such a phase of literary exploration, she discovered an ancient literary work, *Radhika Santawanamu* (The Appeasement of Radhika), also known as *Ila Deviyamu* (The Tale of Ila). This eighteenth-century text, written in Telugu by the famous courtesan, dancer, and poet Muddupalani, also a consort of the Maratha ruler Pratapasimha of

Thanjavur, captured her attention. The work tells the impassioned love story of a married woman, Radha, who becomes deeply enamoured with a young boy, Krishna, and yearns for union with him. This bold and emotional narrative left a deep impression on Nagarathnamma. She resolved to translate and publish a new edition of the work, which would preserve the spirit and aesthetic integrity of the original work. However, her decision to restore the expurgated portions from earlier editions of 1887 and 1907, which had been removed on moral grounds, and republish a revised version of *Radhika Santawanamu*, sparked intense controversy among the conservative section of contemporary society. The censored parts comprised several explicit erotic verses and a prologue in which Muddupalani had described her literary lineage, inherited from her *devadasi* mother and grandmother, and the artistic traditions they had nurtured. Nagarathnamma felt that the sanitised editions, then in circulation, had severely diminished the vitality of the original text. She took it upon herself to revive that literary piece and reinstate the authenticity that had been unjustly censored. (Muddupalani, 2011, p. xviii)

It was quite a valiant act for the time, as the contemporary social voice was becoming increasingly offensive against the *devadasi* tradition. The movement to abolish this age-old custom gained significant momentum through various social reform initiatives, most notably with the beginning of the anti-nautch movement in Madras in 1892. This movement's central objective was enacting legislative measures to eradicate what was increasingly being condemned as a 'social evil.' Reverend J. Murdoch from Madras Christian Literary Association, who was leading this movement, termed the *devadasis* as 'repulsive and immoral' and equated them with the 'commonplace prostitutes. (Bose, 2022, p. 23) The changing societal attitude towards the female practitioners of singing and dancing can be comprehended when the felicitation news of Gauhar Jaan, one of the most celebrated artists of early twentieth-century India and the first 'Gramophone Star' of the country, was reported under the title 'The Nautch Girl: Question of Her Position in Social System Troubling India' and was published in the Sunday edition of *The Evening Star* on 24 November 1907.

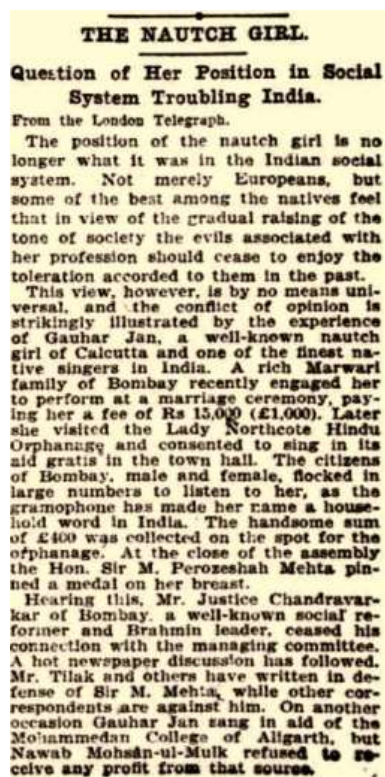


Fig.3. The article was first published in the *London Telegraph* and was later republished in the Sunday edition of *The Evening Star* on 24 November 1907.

Image Source: https://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/ndl_nw

The newspaper reporting mentioned above shows that a section of contemporary Indian society, particularly those with a conservative and puritan mindset, disapproved of both the nautch performances and the performers. To raise awareness among the Indian populace about the evils associated with the courtesans as well as the *devadasi* system, such as financial loss, physical weakness due to contagious diseases, and negative influences on one's moral character, numerous articles and pamphlets were regularly published. The only solution put forward by the reformers to improve the social condition was the abolition of the system. Considering it their responsibility, social reformers from England started to persuade the educated Indians to reject the arts and the artists, casting a boycott upon the system.

It was under such socio-cultural environments that Nagarathnamma announced the publication of the bold feminist tale of a fellow *devadasi*, and this pronouncement quite noticeably set the Madras literary and cultural scene ablaze. A series of intense protests began to arise. By 1911 (the revised edition of the book was published on 10 March 1910 by Bangalore Nagarathnamma), several editorials started criticising Nagarathnamma, labelling her initiative as 'a defiled and crude work of a prostitute now being glorified by another prostitute', which was said to have an injurious effect on the moral values of society. (Sampath, 2021, pp. 52-58) The situation escalated into a law-and-order crisis. Nagarathnamma confronted this situation steadfastly and went to court when the book was banned. After a prolonged examination, the verdict ruled against Nagarathnamma's

appeal, imposing a complete ban on its publication and distribution in 1927. However, it was only after India gained independence that the government withdrew the ban, and the book, with its rightful restoration, was finally published in 1952. (Sriram, 2007, pp. 60-61)

Nagarathnamma fought against the hypocrisy of a society that wanted to disown its cultural past by opposing the publication of a book. Her protest had drawn public sympathy towards her and significantly altered her social image. Here on, she was recognised not only as a skilled singer or one of the earliest recording artists of the country, but also as a defiant and courageous female figure. She openly questioned the puritanism of Indian society and the forces of colonial modernity that aimed to remove numerous practices and rituals intrinsic to the cultural heritage of India. However, her conflict with conservative ideologies did not diminish her widespread appeal. She began featuring in another new form of public entertainment, i.e. radio. By the 1930s, she had emerged as one of the leading artists in this burgeoning aural medium, which had by then become a popular platform for public entertainment. Bangalore Nagarathnamma was regularly invited to perform for the radio broadcasts, especially on Sundays and public holidays. She was among the first batch of singers, along with the *Harikatha* exponent C Saraswathi Bai and Chittoor Subramania Pillai, who performed for Madras Radio Corporation in its formative years. (Sriram, 2007, p. 153)

From an unsung *devadasi*, Nagarathnamma raised herself to the pedestal of an admirable personage of her time. She lived a lavish and liberal life. Her generosity towards the members of her own community, especially in supporting women's education and helping them build a strong foundation in the arts, was particularly noteworthy. In 1927, she was elected the first president of the 'Devadasi Association of Madras'. She was the first female Indian artist in Madras to pay income tax. Throughout her life, Bangalore Nagarathnamma remained extremely passionate and obdurate in all her pursuits and never compromised. To immortalise the memory of Thyagaraja, the revered saint-composer of Thiruvaiyaru, Nagarathnamma donated the earnings of her entire lifetime and constructed his *samadhi* (a memorial) at Thiruvaiyaru. On 19 May 1952, at the age of 74, Bangalore Nagarathnamma took her last breath. In her honour, a memorial was built beside the *samadhi* of her beloved saint, Thyagaraja, at Thiruvaiyaru.

Conclusion

The advent of sound recording technology in colonial India played a vital role in reshaping the cultural and social trajectories of female artists, offering them a new medium through which their artistry, identity, and resistance could resonate. It opened up the option for a comparatively dignified life for those who deserved it by dint of their talents. For the *devadasis* like Bangalore Nagarathnamma, this technological innovation was not merely a tool for musical dissemination but a means of self-assertion and social defiance. Embracing the technology not only amplified her voice and widened her reach but also consolidated her confidence to challenge the deeply entrenched structures of caste, class, gender, and 'morality' that sought to silence the voice of 'public women'. The translation and re-publication of *Radhika Santwanamu* is a testament to her courage and cultural resistance against the Western mindset, which often examined and critiqued Eastern traditions through a colonial lens and tried to label them as 'barbaric'. In bringing Muddupalani's poetry back into circulation, she directly confronted the moralist and purist agendas of colonial modernity that aimed to erase the legacy of the *devadasis* from the history of art

and literature in India. Through this act, she reclaimed a space for female expression that was unapologetic and courageous. A woman, who was a practitioner of Carnatic music, a pioneering recording artist and most importantly, a *devadasi*, successfully combated all notions of womanly propriety that society sought to impose as hegemonic ideals on women and established her *locus standi* even after belonging to the periphery and posing challenging questions to the patriarchal core.

Notes and References:

Notes:

¹ Thyagaraja was considered the greatest composer of Carnatic music of all time. He was born in 1767, and he composed many devotional songs, mainly in Telugu. Three principal branches that emerged among his disciples were 'Wallajahpet', 'Tillaisthanam' and 'Umayalpuram' schools.

² Putta Lakshmi was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1891 and died soon after that.

³ *Thumri* is a genre of Hindustani classical music. The lyrics in *Thumri* are either romantic or devotional, and usually revolve around a girl's love for Krishna. The lyrics are primarily in Uttar Pradesh's dialect of Hindi (Awadhi), but Brij-Bhasha, a language in the same region, is also common. *Thumri* is sensuous in nature and usually features a greater flexibility with the raga.

⁴ *Padams* were short musical compositions of the light classical genre, traditionally having love-related words, sung in a slow pace.

⁵ *Javali* represents a light classical form of love song that portrays people's emotions and originates from the Kannada term 'Jhawali', meaning song or poetry.

⁶ Sadguru Tyagaraja Swami (1767 -1847) was a saint and composer of Carnatic music, Tyagaraja is said to have composed thousands of devotional compositions, known as *kirtis*, most of them in praise of Lord Rama.

⁷ *Harikatha*, a unique form of story-telling centred on the life and teachings of Krishna, emerged in South India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was developed under the patronage of the Maratha kingdom of Thanjavur, shaped by a variety of significant cultural and religious influences.

⁸ In the early era of sound recording, some Indian vocalists held the belief that singing into a machine would invite a curse, potentially harming their vocal quality and permanently damaging their singing abilities.

⁹ In the early era of sound recording, singers were given a time limit of three and a half minutes to record their music for a 78 r.p.m (Rotation per Minute) gramophone shellac record.

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